

## Skin

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Easter Sunday - April 4, 2021

Texts: Acts 10:34-43; Mark 16:1-8

### Mark 16:1-8

*Women were the first witnesses to the resurrection, according to the Gospel of Mark.*

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So, they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Did you hear what you just heard? Let me tell you again. Early in the morning, at the threshold of day, three women set out on a bold mission: to anoint the body of their friend Jesus, to soothe his cold skin with oil and spices. To cleanse the body of the dead, to smooth away the dried blood from his wounds, will leave them unclean. Untouchable. Do they care? No. Theirs is an act of deep love and tenderness.

In our culture, death is mostly whisked out of sight, left to professionals. Our loved ones are burned to ash or puffed up with chemicals and painted in a mockery of life. My father was the most *alive* person I ever knew. When I saw him in his coffin, I honestly laughed out loud. The funeral director was not amused. But that fake skin wasn't my dad.

They handled death differently in Jesus' day.

These three - Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome - risk their own skins to care for a crucified corpse. Daring - or dumb? They fear their quest will be foiled by the boulder blocking the tomb. Yet they are determined to touch their beloved teacher one last time.

They find the skin of the earth already broken; the stone rolled away. They move across the threshold and see a man sitting there, clothed in white. Not Jesus. They are shaken. He speaks, to

calm them. He tells them to go to Galilee. They tremble, afraid. They run away. They say nothing to anyone. This is how our oldest gospel ends.

What have they touched? What has touched them? What has pierced their souls? This is the mystery of Easter, the mystery only faith can unravel.

Please pray with me: God, you put on our human skin to show us who you are, to prove how well you know us: from the inside out. Pierce our hidebound hearts so we may let in your love, love that never takes no for an answer. Amen

Consider your skin. You live inside it. Wherever your skin is, there is a good chance that's where you are. Skin is the barrier that protects you from bacteria floating in air or lurking on surfaces. But skin is also porous, sensitive; feeling enters through it. You touch and know the world through your skin. Your skin is the threshold both separating you from the world and connecting you to it. You, in your skin, are the threshold to the infinite worlds that live within you.

For the past year most of us have suffered from skin-hunger. We have been starved of touch, denied the sweet, sticky hugs of our grandchildren, the grasp of our elders' frail hands. We have worn masks like a second skin over mouths and noses, as a safety barrier, a shield keeping us apart. We have been smile-deprived, it's true; but the mask itself is the mark of our care for others, our goodwill.

Take a moment to touch skin to skin. If you are with someone, nestle palm in palm. If you are alone, make your hands a prayer. Feel: is the skin warm or cool, rough or smooth? Then reach up and touch your face, your throat. Your life is in there; feel it pulsing beneath the skin, blood and breath, keeping you alive. But pierce too deeply or squeeze too long, and life departs, and with it all the worlds to which only you hold the key. Skin matters. What's inside skin matters, too.

Fifty-three years ago today, a man died when his skin was pierced by bullets: the same man who said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character" -- by the inside, not the outside. Three weeks ago, six Asian American women were shot and killed along with two others, eight lives running out through their violated skin. Extinguished with them were the inner worlds known to them alone.

I know; you didn't come to church on Easter morning to hear about death, did you? Well, then, let's talk about life: let's talk about the life of God in human form. Have you ever wondered why God, who could have been born as anyone, anywhere, chose to be born as a poor, brown-skinned member of a conquered nation run by powerful white men? Think about it. But then think harder, because what lived inside Jesus was bigger than his skin, or his social world.

He walked the length and breadth of his home country, sandaled feet on dusty, rocky ground, sharing the aches and the ecstasies of life in human skin.

He taught broken people they were infinitely more precious than they had been told, that their longing for something more than bread was holy hunger, and that he could satisfy it.

He healed the sick and embraced lepers, those with dreaded skin diseases. He demonstrated in real time that the life within them was more than their ravaged exteriors revealed. He assured them they were lovable, touchable. Worthy.

He commanded evil spirits devouring people from within to let go; his word evicted demons.

He spoke truth to deceit disguised as political expediency; his honest love exposed the lust for power.

He elevated women to equality, challenging the lie that a woman's body made her less than a man.

He walked in matter like yours to tell people, up close, skin to skin, that *they* matter, body and soul, outside and inside. That each one matters enough to be healed, healed of the stigma placed on some by others who can't see that every outside wrapping has beauty, and holds beauty within. Jesus can even heal the most lethal skin disease of all, the sickness of white supremacy, if we who suffer from it let God's love get under our skin. God is that big.

The baby born in Bethlehem, wrapped in birth clothes and laid in a manger was bigger than the stable, bigger than all Palestine. The man pierced on Calvary, wrapped in burial clothes, and laid in a tomb was bigger than the grave, vaster than earth itself. The earth burst its own skin and loosed the man, the God, inside to run wild and free through the world. Resurrection turned Jesus inside out for our sake, so that we could see and feel the mystery of love within him; and not just in him. So that you could grasp the possibilities that live within you and around you, bigger than your skin, and bound for a glory like Jesus' own.

Who can comprehend all that? Not I. But I will tell you something else I hardly understand. Four days ago, the skin of my arm was pierced for the second time in three weeks. Now, because of punctures so slight I barely felt them, something new is living inside me, working hard, they say, protecting me from a potentially deadly virus. What's going on in there will protect not just me but those I long to touch, hand in hand, cheek to cheek. What is happening inside me now protects a world so much bigger than my one small self. They call it vaccination. I call it some crazy kind of resurrection. Just because I can't see it working doesn't mean it isn't real.

A lot of people find it hard to believe in the resurrection of the body. But just because we can't see it doesn't mean it isn't real. We are all more than skin deep; you are more than meets the eye. Woman is more than womb, man is more than muscle; how you know yourself *within* yourself means more than any label assigned at birth, as our transgender friends are so beautifully teaching us. When I speak to my father, as I still do, I don't see him stiff and puffed and painted in a casket, I see his living face, his bright eyes smiling on me. When I pray, I pray to a God who hears and answers. A living God. You can pray to that one, too.

At Easter, Christians dare to stand on the threshold between life and death and declare that we believe: when this skin I now call home is dust and ashes, yet in my flesh will I see God. We proclaim that the worlds that live inside you now will live on in God's eternity. Just because we can't see it doesn't mean it isn't real.

But if you really want to see Jesus, the God with skin, it's not so hard. Remember the command the angel gave the brave and frightened women at the threshold of the tomb: "Tell my disciples to go back to the place where we walked and worked and laughed and learned together: the place where we freed the oppressed, healed the broken, hugged the lepers, fed the hungry, spoke the truth, exposed the lies. I will meet you there."

He meets us there still. Skin and all. Thanks be to God. Amen

### Prayers

God of time and eternity, you walked the earth in skin like ours, long ago; you live among us still, wherever human need cries out for healing. Bring us always to the places where we can meet you, prepared to work and watch and wait by your side.

We thank you for the witness of those who have gone before us: parents and grandparents, mentors and teachers whose faith was bigger than their footprint on the earth. And we thank you for those who still strive to walk in the way of compassion and understanding, no matter how they name you.

Our hearts grieve with all whose lives are threatened by oppression, especially the people of Myanmar; we suffer in sympathy with those who are defined and rejected for the color of their skin; we stand up with those who stand for justice wherever on earth they may be.

We hold in your light those who still suffer from the coronavirus, from brutal storms, from mass shootings, from hunger and violence in their home countries even as they seek a better life in this land. Give us faith to go forward in trust and in hope of joyful reunion with you and those who have stood on that threshold and looked forward in hope, for in your name we pray. Amen.